The work translated here for the first time was chosen for its obscurity and its concise representativeness of Rousseau's thinking. It was an unpolished manuscript published for the first time as "Le Luxe, le commerce et les arts," in *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* vol. 3, edited by B. Gagnebin, M. Raymond, and Robert Derathé (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 516–24 and 1529–32. Both the text and the unbracketed notes are © Gallimard, 1964, and are used with permission; bracketed material is by the present editor.

Luxury, Commerce, and the Arts[2]

If men could recognize how much more dangerous it is for them to be mistaken than it is useful for them to have knowledge, they would be less eager to listen to the teachings of the philosophers; and the Philosophers would be more cautious about dispensing them, if they could sense that

1. In his previous writings—in particular, or so it seems, in the first version of the *Discourse on Inequality,* with the *Responses* to the King of Poland and to Mr. Bordes—Rousseau had considered the issues of luxury, commerce and arts "in relation to morals." Here he examines them from a political point of view "in relation to the prosperity of the State." The reflections included in this fragment are a result of his reading of "several modern writers," and concern mainly "two men [who] have taken it upon themselves today to overthrow all the economic maxims of the ancient politicians to replace them with a brand new system of government." Since they are contemporary authors, Rousseau, as usual, does not give their names. One may think that he refers to J.-F. Melon (*Essai Politique sur le Commerce,* first edition, 1734, 2nd edition, 1736 [see chapter 15 in this volume]), who was denounced in the *Response to M. Bordes* as the author of a "poisonous doctrine," and to David Hume, whose *Essays* on commerce, luxury ("Refinement in the Arts"), and money had been published in 1752 and translated into French the following year [see chapter 23]. One could also think of "The Worldling" and the "Apology for Luxury" [see chapters 16 and 17], but the words used by Rousseau ("two men trying to become famous with uncommon opinions") are enough to show that Voltaire is not referred to in this text—at least not directly.

one bad line of reasoning would diminish their reputations more than a hundred truths they discovered could add to it. The best use one can make of Philosophy is to have it destroy the evils it has given birth to, even if in the process one has to destroy the good (if there is any) caused by it. For in what is added to the simple light of reason and the pure feelings of nature, it is still better to remove the good than to let the evil be. It would be to the advantage of society if philosophers were to organize their work so that, after many Books and disputes, they found themselves mutually refuted, with everything null and void. It is true that we would not know anything then, but we would agree upon that in good faith, and in the search for truth, we would have truly taken all the steps one must take backwards from error to ignorance.[2] In order to work towards this salutary aim, I shall endeavor to examine a few questions of ethics and politics hashed out and settled by several modern Writers, and which deal with subjects on which I have been obliged to meditate. In this way, I also hope to develop certain Theorems which a fear of digression led me to put forward without proof in other writings. But since in all this I wish rather to attack mistakes than to establish new truths, I honestly confess that, when the works of my adversaries cease to exist, mine will be perfectly useless. I do not mean to be the guide of my contemporaries; I am merely warning them when I see someone who leads them astray; and I would not have to bother them with my opinions if nobody took it upon himself to be their leader.

The issue I wish to examine here deals with luxury, commerce and the arts, not exactly in relation to morals as I did previously, but with a new perspective and in relation to the prosperity of the State.

All the ancients regarded luxury as a sign that morals were corrupted, and that the government was weak. Sumptuary Laws[3] are almost as old as polities. The Egyptians had them, the Hebrews received some from their legislators; they can even be found in Persia; as for the Greeks, the

2. Cf. *Emile,* book III: "Because the more men know the more they are mistaken, the only means of avoiding errors is ignorance."

3. Rousseau does not believe in their efficacy: "it is not with sumptuary laws that one manages to entirely suppress luxury," he writes in *Considerations on the Polish government.*

deep contempt they had for Asian pomp was the best sumptuary law they could have had.

This contempt was even more palpable among the Romans. For them, the luxury and magnificence of the other nations were true objects of ridicule, and the use they made of them in their triumphs was much more likely to ridicule all the vain pomp of the defeated Peoples than to give the conquerors the desire to imitate it.[4]

It was natural that commerce should be tainted with the contempt felt towards luxury. The Romans despised it, the Greeks left it to Foreigners; mechanical arts were exercised almost solely by Slaves, and the liberal arts themselves required a great superiority in talent for those who exercised them in order to be deemed respectable—even though they never acquired such respectability in Rome during the entire time of the Republic. In short, in the countries where money was despised, all the means to earn some had always something ignominious about them.[5]

When these Peoples started to degenerate, when vanity and love of pleasure succeeded that of homeland [*patrie*°] and virtue, vice and indolence came in from everywhere, and there was only luxury and money to satisfy them. Individuals became wealthier; commerce and the arts blossomed, and the State soon perished.[6]

However, during the time of the greatest depravity, philosophers and

4. Cf. *Considerations on the Polish government:* "Romans would display much luxury in their triumphs. But it was the luxury of the conquered; the more it shone, the less it seduced people. Its brightness itself was a lesson for the Romans. The captive Kings were tied with chains of gold and precious stones. That's luxury of course." One can find a slightly different remark in *Discourse on Political Economy:* "The hat of a citizen who had been freed from slavery, the civic crown of the man who had saved somebody else's life—that is what was looked upon with the greatest delight in the pomp of triumphs; and it must be noted that among the crowns used to praise great battle deeds, only the civic crown and that of victors were made of herbs and leaves; all the others were only made of gold."

5. According to *Considerations on the Polish government,* one of the means to create a free, peaceful and sensible nation is "to turn money into something despicable, and if possible, useless."

6. Cf. *Discourse on Inequality,* footnote IX: "From Society and the luxury to which it gives birth arise the liberal and mechanical arts, commerce, letters, and all those superfluities which make industry flourish, enrich and ruin nations."

politicians never ceased to protest loudly against all those disorders whose effects they could foresee. Nobody contradicted them, and nobody corrected them. All agreed that their reasoning was sound, and all behaved so as to make it look even better. Those declaimers themselves seemed to pick out the flaws of the Peoples only to make theirs more inexcusable. They publicly blamed the vices whose examples they would have shown if they had not been warned against them.

Therefore, in indulging in a behavior that was opposed to their own maxims, people did not stop paying tribute to truth. It is thus that all nations at all times have agreed in condemning luxury (even when giving themselves over to it), and that during such a long succession of centuries, no Philosopher has dared to contradict public opinion.

I do not claim to take advantage of this universal agreement to support the view I am about to develop. I know that Philosophy, as it adopts the proofs of Philosophers, does without their testimonies, and that reason does not care about authority. But as I know from experience that the word Paradox can be detrimental to propositions that have been proven,[7] I am most pleased to take this resource away at the outset from those who will have none other to combat what I have to prove. I am thus warning them that the opinion which I attack must be called a paradox, which is as extraordinary as it is ridiculous and pernicious; and by refuting this soft, effeminate Philosophy, whose convenient maxims have acquired so many sectarians among us, I am only joining in the cry of all nations and pleading the cause of common sense and of society.

Finally, after so many centuries, two men who strove to become famous with uncommon opinions, which could flatter the taste for illusion, dared today to overthrow all the economic maxims of ancient politics, and to substitute a system of government which is entirely new and so brilliant that it was difficult not to be seduced by it. Besides, since their own interests did very well out of it, it became another way to achieve success in a century when nobody cares any longer about the public good, and when this ridiculously profaned term serves only as an excuse for Tyrants and as a pretext for thieves.

7. Here one must remember the famous sentence of the author in the second book of *Emile:* "I would rather be a man of paradox than a man of prejudice."

2

In order to think clearly on the question at stake, I would first like to fix some sure and clear principles which nobody can reasonably deny, and which serve as a base for all my research. Otherwise, if, instead of definitions, each of us has only vague ideas, developed according to our own whim and fancy, we will never know very well what is meant by the words "happiness" and "prosperity" for a people.

Before talking about the means of making a people happy and prosperous, let us try and determine what constitutes the glory and felicity of a people, and what sure signs will enable us to know that a people finds itself in such a condition.

I am deeply aware of the fact that this question will seem hardly embarrassing to most modern men of politics. For one of them will tell me without hesitation that that happiest nation lies where all the arts are best cultivated; another that it lies where commerce flourishes the most; another, where there is the most money; and the majority where all these advantages are joined to the highest degree. But let us first examine whether or not these definitions are correct.

First, as for commerce and the arts, it is obvious—even in the system I combat—that these are rather the means used to achieve State prosperity than the essence of that prosperity. For I do not believe that, to demonstrate the happiness of a nation, any man would presume to advance as proof that it is composed of workers and merchants.[8] And even though I were to admit that workers and merchants are necessary to satisfy public needs, it will never follow that the nation is happy, since one can prove—as I shall below—that commerce and the arts, while providing for a few imaginary needs, produce a much greater number of real ones.[9]

Perhaps one will object that the arts, manufactures and commerce do

8. For Rousseau, a happy nation is "a people of farmers," composed of "countryfolk." He advises Corsica to "keep a rustic system, and only to change it when the Island will no longer be large enough" (*Constitutional Project for Corsica*).

9. At the end of the paragraph one reads the following words which have been crossed out: *The most solid advantage a nation can derive from its industry is to attract money from foreign countries.*

not so much aim at providing for the individual conveniences of citizens as to enrich the State, either through the introduction of foreign money or through the circulation of the money already there. Therefore it would follow that the entire happiness of a people consists in being rich in specie—an issue I still have to examine.

As gold and silver are merely the signs representing the things for which they have been exchanged, they have properly speaking no absolute value, and it is not even up to the Sovereign to give them one.[10] For when the Prince orders for instance that a silver coin having such and such a weight, and bearing such and such a mark should be worth so many *livres* or *sols,* he fixes a denomination for commerce and nothing more. One crown is thus worth so many *livres,* or one florin is worth precisely so many *sols.* But it is clear that the price of the *sol* or the *livre*—and thus of the florin or the crown—will remain as variable as it was before, and that it will rise or fall not according to the will of the Prince, but through entirely separate causes. All operations made to fix the values of currencies are thus only imaginary; or if they have some real effects, it is only upon annual income, pensions and all payments that are fixed only in the ideal denominations of *livres,* crowns or similar currencies. Therefore, when the Prince raises the price of currencies, it is a sham through which he deceives his creditors; and when he lowers it, it is another sham through which he deceives his debtors. But since the prices of all commodities rise or fall according to the changes made in the currencies, the same relationship always prevails in commerce between the sign and the thing represented. What I am saying here about cash also applies to the worth of the gold or silver mark fixed by a public edict. This price is only what the flow of commerce makes it; and regardless of all the edicts, the same variations appear depending on whether business is going well or not.

Even though money has no real value in itself, it assumes one by tacit convention in every country where it is used, and this value varies according to the combination of causes which serve to determine it. These causes can be reduced to three main ones—i.e., 1st, the abundance or

10. Cf. *A Constitutional Project for Corsica:* "Money is not only a sign; it is a relative sign which has a real effect only because it is unequally distributed." A similar statement is made in *Considerations on the Polish government:* "As a matter of fact, money is not wealth, it is only a sign of it. It is not the sign which must be multiplied, but what it represents."

scarcity of specie, 2nd, the abundance or scarcity of foodstuffs and other goods, 3rd, the amount of circulation, which depends on the quantity of exchanges, that is to say on the vigor of commerce. According to the way those three things are combined in a country, money can reach an exorbitant price or fall to virtually nothing. As a result, a State may find itself in such a situation that even with a great quantity of money, it would still remain very poor and lack the bare necessities. On the contrary, it could be deprived of money while still being very wealthy thanks to the abundance of all the things other peoples are obliged to spend their money on.[11]

One must add to this first observation a second one, no less important and directly if not immediately implicated in the first. For there are many distinctions one must make between the exclusive wealth of a few individuals, and that which is common to a whole nation.[12] Since the words poor and rich are relative, there are poor people only because there are rich people, and in more than one sense. For the moment I limit myself to the relation between the two ideas. One calls a man wealthy when he has more possessions than the majority of people is used to having, and one calls him poor not only when he does not have enough to live on, but also when he has less than others.[13] Such revolutions may take place in society that the same man may be alternately wealthy and poor, without increasing or decreasing his fortune. The same can be said of nations whether considered individually or compared to one another. Therefore each people takes hardly less care—if a bit less overtly—to harm the advantages of its neighbors than to work on its own. Mankind is thus sacrificed to the national interest by bodies politic, just as it is sacrificed

11. According to Rousseau, the true prosperity of the State does not lie in its pecuniary wealth, but in its independence or its economic autarchy.

12. Here Rousseau tackles the problem of the distribution of wealth, and through this, he tackles his favorite issue—that of inequality.

13. In *Considerations on the Polish government* the principle according to which wealth is relative only applies to pecuniary wealth. Rousseau writes, "Pecuniary wealth is only relative, and according to relations which may change because of thousands of reasons, one can be successively rich and poor with the same amount of money, but not with commodities in kind. For as they are immediately useful to men, they also have absolute values, which do not depend on commercial dealings." It is true that different aspects of the question are looked upon, depending on whether one studies it strictly from an economic point of view as here, or whether one considers it from a slightly different point of view as in our fragment—i.e., that of social psychology.

every day to the spirit of property by individuals. However, one cannot easily imagine how the poverty of one country can contribute to the well-being of the inhabitants of another.

Let us assume that, after long and painful efforts, a people manages to fulfill its plans in this regard, and that it has ruined all its neighbors and piled up for itself as much gold and silver as there is in the rest of the world. And let us see what will result from this public prosperity for the individual happiness of the citizens. First, if this wealth is equally distributed, it could surely not remain in that situation, or it would certainly be as if nonexistent for those who possess it; for in everything beyond the bare necessities, the advantages of fortune are only felt because of differences. Thus, if according to this hypothesis, all these treasures were destroyed in a single night, while foodstuffs and other goods were not spoiled, nobody would mind this loss, and it would be scarcely noticed the following day.

But fixing our attention on so fanciful an hypothesis—i.e., the equal distribution of wealth[14]—would be taking too much advantage of time. This equality cannot be accepted—even as an hypothesis—because it is not in the nature of things, and I believe that any sensible reader will have anticipated this reflection.

As soon as the use of gold was known to men, they all strove to pile up a great quantity of it. Naturally, success had to correspond to the various degrees of industriousness and avidity of the competitors—in other words, they had to be deeply unequal. This first inequality, combined with avarice and with the talents which had produced it, must have increased even more through its own strength; for one of the vices[15] of existing societies is that the difficulty to acquire anything always increases according to needs, and that the surplus the wealthy have is itself what enables them to deprive the poor of the bare necessities. It is an axiom in business as well as in physics that one makes nothing with nothing. Money is the true seed of money, and the first crown is infinitely harder to earn than the second million.[16] Besides, thefts are punished only when

14. Cf. *Social Contract,* book II, chapter II: "As far as equality is concerned, this word does not imply that the degrees of power and wealth are absolutely the same."

15. A first version of this was: *What shows best the extravagance of existing societies . . .*

16. These phrases can be found almost verbatim in *Political Economy:* "One does nothing with nothing; it is true in business as well as in Physics. Money is the seed of money,

necessity makes them forgivable; they cost honor and life to the poor man, and bring glory and fortune to the wealthy man. A destitute man who takes a crown from a harsh man sated with gold in order to have bread is a thief led to the gallows, whereas honored citizens peacefully quench their thirst with the blood of the craftsman and the farmer.[17] And the monopolies of the trader and the embezzlements of the tax-gatherer bear the names of useful talents and ensure those exercising them that they have the favor of the Prince and the esteem of the public. That is how the wealth of a whole nation makes the opulence of a few individuals at the expense of the public, and how the treasures of millionaires increase the destitution of the citizenry. For in that forced, monstrous inequality, it follows that the sensuousness of the wealthy devours in delights the substance of the people, and blows their way only a dry, stale, brown bread at the cost of sweat and servitude.

If we add to this that the prices of all things inevitably increase because of the abundance of specie and especially the scarcity of foodstuffs—which must result in such a situation as I will prove—we shall see how easy it is to demonstrate that the more money a State has, the more poor people it must have, and the more the poor must suffer.

Now since commerce and the arts are only proofs of human need in a nation, and since money is not a proof of true wealth, it follows that the combination of all these things is not a proof of happiness, either.

To set aside other useless reckonings, one must distinguish between the means individuals use to try to become happy—each according to his character and inclinations—and those the social body can put to use for the same purpose. For as society can neither foresee nor satisfy the different desires of the people who compose it, it does not take care of that, but only provides for the common defense and security. And as far as subsistence is concerned, it takes care to enable individuals to provide for their own needs, so that all the commitments the confederation can take

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and the first pistole is sometimes more difficult to earn than the second million." One might be tempted to infer from the similarities between these texts that the fragment was written before the *Political Economy,* which borrows this passage from it. But obviously it is just a conjecture.

17. The same image is used in the fragment *On the State of War:* "I see . . . a crowd of people who are starving, who are overburdened with labor and hunger, and whose blood and tears are drunk by the wealthy man."

towards the confederates are reduced to these two—peace and abundance. As long as by the word peace one means the security peace creates externally and the manners and morals [*moeurs*°] which create peace within, but also the freedom without which there is no true peace.[18] For tyranny and slavery are obviously states of war,[19] and it is easy to prove that a slave[20] who kills his master sins against neither natural law nor international law.

As far as abundance is concerned, this word does not refer to a situation in which a few individuals gorge themselves while the rest are obliged to resort to them to get their subsistence at the price they want. Nor do I refer to this other hypothetical and impossible situation (at least in the long run) in which everyone would find something to satisfy all his needs near at hand without any work and effort. I refer, rather, to the situation in which all the bare necessities of life are gathered in the country in such quantities that everyone can through his work easily amass everything he needs for his maintenance.[21]

18. Rousseau always protested against those, like Hobbes, who wanted to turn "civil tranquillity" into the aim of civil society. According to him, there is no true peace without freedom. To a certain extent and despite what has been said, Rousseau remains closer to Locke than to any other theoretician of his time.

19. In the *Social Contract* (book I, chapter IV), Rousseau states that "the state of war continues to subsist" between master and slave. He is still more explicit in the first version of the book (book I, chapter V): "As soon as the subjugated people can overthrow the yoke that has been imposed on it by force and get rid of its master—that is to say its enemy—it must do it if it can. And when it gets its legitimate freedom back, it only uses the right to wage war, which persists as long as the violence it allows takes place."

20. The manuscript had originally the word *slavery*, which is obviously a *lapsus*.

21. One knows how vigorously Rousseau condemns idleness in the third book of *Emile:* "Outside of society, the isolated man owes nothing to anyone; he has a right to live as he pleases. But in society, where he necessarily lives at the expense of others, he owes them in work the price of his maintenance; this is without exception. To work is therefore an indispensable duty for social man. Rich or poor, powerful or feeble, any idle citizen is a thief." No idle citizens—that will therefore be the maxim of any well-ordered State. The obligation to work must however have its counterpart in the profitability of work. Men must be able to secure their subsistence and independence with their manual work. Here then is one of the most modern and revolutionary aspects of the social thought of Rousseau. He wanted to free the world of labor from the domination of the idle.